



The Three Semitic Religions

The Semitic faiths have many commonalities, writes FARIDA KHANAM



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Among the 12 major religions of the world, there are three — Judaism, Christianity and Islam — which represent the Semitic branch of religion. All three originated in the Middle East and each one acknowledges Abraham as its Patriarch.

Judaism, which originated in Mesopotamia around 200 BCE, is the oldest of the three. Christianity, dating back to a period between 4 BCE and 30 CE, is the second oldest, with its origins in Israel, the birthplace of Jesus Christ, or Jesus of Nazareth. Islam, the most recently founded Semitic religion, came into existence with the advent of the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century CE. All the three religions are monotheistic.

The word 'Semitic' denotes those peoples, mainly Jews and Arabs, who belong to the Middle East. The name derives possibly from Shem, Noah's son, from whom these people are descended. Abraham was a member of this same ethnic group. There were other great spiritual messengers who were also Semites. According to a *Hadith*, 124,000 prophets were sent to the world by God to guide mankind. A dozen of these prophets are mentioned by name in the *Quran*.

All three share the common concept of God, who is called Jehovah, or

Yahweh in Judaism, God in Christianity, and Allah in Islam.

According to Judaism, there is one eternal God, who revealed His will to the Israelites in the *Torah*, the most important part of which is the Ten Commandments, common to both Judaism and Christianity. In Christianity, God heads the Holy Trinity of the Father, the Son (Jesus) and the Holy Spirit (Jesus risen from the dead). Islam believes in One All-Powerful God who sends His messengers to guide mankind. Like the *Torah* in Judaism and the *Bible* in Christianity, the sacred book of the Muslims is the *Quran*, which was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in Arabic.

Jews, Christians and Muslim are in agreement that God is One and is the living, merciful, omnipotent Creator of the universe. The *Quran* says: "Those who believe, and the Jews, Christians and Sabaeans — whoever believes in God and the Last Day and acts uprightly — will be rewarded by their Lord; they shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve." (2:62)

The concept of Resurrection — the belief that the soul is immortal and that the dead will be brought to life again — is central to the tenets of all

three. The object of Resurrection is to bring human beings after death into the court of God where they will be judged, based on their good or bad deeds, and accordingly rewarded.

Although the adherents of all the three faiths believe that they are the 'chosen people', their redemption is dependent upon their having done good deeds and repented for their bad deeds. Only the righteous can attain to salvation.



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Judaism, Christianity and Islam all regard almsgiving as integral to divine teaching. Charity is not regarded as a favour to the poor, but as something to which they have a right. All three religions stress the need to alleviate the suffering of the poor, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and care for the orphan and widow. The *Book of Deuteronomy* describes the giving of charity as a divine virtue (10: 17-18).

One imperative common to the three religions is *tazkia*, self-purification, which is essential for entry into Paradise. It is through worship and giving assistance to the poor that believers may purify themselves.

To overcome hatred and violence, Islam directs believers to purify their souls by going through the two stages

of what it calls *tazkia-e-nafs*, purification of the souls, which entail, first, distancing themselves from evil influences through *muhasaba* — that is by engaging in introspection and then, by way of contemplation, assessing their degree of mental conditioning so that they may properly de-condition their minds.

Love for all is common to all three religions. Love, which is universal by nature, can be fostered by continuous introspection. Jesus Christ once said: "Love your enemy." The *Quran* teaches: "Do good deeds in return for bad deeds and you will find that one who was once your enemy has become your dearest friend." (41: 34)

All three Semitic religions entertain the concept of a Divine Saviour who will come to the world at the very last to establish on this earth the righteous Kingdom of God. In Judaism, the Messiah is only an agent of God and not a Saviour or Redeemer as in Christianity. The Jewish concept, however, is similar to the Islamic concept of Mahdi, the rightly guided one, who will restore true religion to the world. The followers of all three religions still await the advent of this Messianic figure. ■

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